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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 000486

SIPDIS

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TAGS: KDEM PGOV IZ

SUBJECT: BABIL DE-BAATH: DEPUTY GOVERNOR GOES FROM OUT TO  
IN TO LIMBO

REF: A. :09 HILLAH 0046  
1B. BAGHDAD 0290

Classified By: PRT BABIL TEAM LEADER RICK ROBERTS FOR REASONS 1.4(B)(D)

11. (U) This is a PRT Babil cable.

12. (C) Summary and Comment: On February 9, a group of approximately 300 people demonstrated in front of the Babil Provincial Government Center against the participation of alleged former Ba'athists in the upcoming national elections.

The demonstration provided a convenient excuse for Governor Salman Al Zarqani (independent) to request that the PC Legal committee fire First Deputy Governor Iskander Witwit (Iraqiyya list) on the grounds that he is a former member of the Ba'ath Party. Witwit, a candidate for national elections, was named on the Accountability and Justice Commission's (AJC) de-Ba'athification exclusion order. The Cassation Chamber upheld his appeal and reinstated him to the candidate list on February 12. Witwit held a press conference announcing his vindication and expectation to return to work. The Governor has not rescinded his orders and the PRT expects the PC Legal committee will oblige. It appears that the anti-Ba'ath demonstration was organized by the provincial government. End summary and comment.

Anti-Ba'ath Demonstration in Front of Babil Governorate

13. (C) On February 9, PRT LES (protect) observed approximately 300 demonstrators gathered at the Babil Government Center, carrying placards condemning the Cassation Chamber, former PM Ayad Allawi (head of the cross-sectarian Iraqiyya coalition), and VP Tariq Hashimi for his purported intention to return the Ba'ath party. Participants included representatives from several tribal organizations, Babylon University students, other student organizations and the local branch of the Martyrs and Political Prisoners Foundation. Second Deputy Governor Sadiq Rasool (INA/National Reform Trend), Provincial Council (PC) member Mahmood Marshidy (NRT), PC Member Majeed Flefle Da'wa Mayor of Hashimiya Zeki Muhee (INA/ISCI) and Mayor of Musayyib Jawad Kadhum Al Jibory (INA/Sadrist Trend) also attended. Iraqi media outlets Al Hurriya TV, Afaq TV and Baghdadiya TV covered the event. PC Chairman Kadhum Majeed Toman (Sadrist Trend) addressed the demonstrators, promising to fire all ex-Ba'athists who had held the party rank of "Member" or higher from any Babil government jobs. Governor Salman Al Zarqani (independent) professed to the demonstrators his opposition to the Ba'athists because of their connection to Saddam and the pain he caused the Iraqi people. A spokesman for the citizens of Babil went even further: "We will get them out of Al Hillah. Death, death to Ba'athists no Ba'athists from today on!"<sup>8</sup>

Babil Governor Zarqani Asks PC to Remove ex-Ba'athist First Deputy Governor Witwit

14. (U) Governor Zarqani announced February 10 that he had suspended First Deputy Governor Iskander Witwit (Iraqiyya

list/Independent) due to his former membership in the Ba'ath party, as alleged by the national Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC). The Governor reportedly passed evidence of Witwit's membership in the Ba'ath to the PC's legal committee and shared it in a press conference on November 11. Witwit, a candidate for national elections and the Coalition Provisional Authority's first governor for Babil, was named on the AJC'S de-Ba'athification exclusion order (ref B) . The Cassation Chamber upheld his appeal and reinstated him to the candidate list on February 12. Zarqani has countered that the appeals decision only applied to the ballot and did not have any bearing on his decision to put Witwit on leave. Qhave any bearing on his decision to put Witwit on leave.

¶5. (C) Witwit spoke to the PC the same day to attempt to dispute the allegations against him and convince them to allow him to keep his job. PRT LES (protect) present at the PC meeting reported that PC Member Mansour Al Mani'a (Iraqiyya) alleged that the demonstrators included Babil Government employees who were instructed to participate.

¶6. (C) LES staff (protect) witnessed a rally in support of Witwit's reinstatement to the ballot on February 14, in provincial capital Al Hillah, which they described as like a &big wedding celebration.<sup>8</sup> Salah Bahiya, head of the Babil Committee for Business Development, told PRT TL that evening that Witwit's removal enjoyed little support among the voters in Babil.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: The PRT expects the PC Legal Committee will remove Witwit based on the document the Governor submitted to them. The Governor's move against Witwit is not surprising, given the history of tension between them. Witwit is a former Governor of Babil Province

who lost his position due to charges of corruption; current Governor Zarqani led the movement against Witwit. Witwit has never fully accepted his lesser role as First Deputy Governor and unsuccessfully tried to organize a coalition in the PC against the Governor (ref A). The AJC's allegations against Witwit and the anti-Ba'athist demonstration offered Governor Zarqani a convenient excuse to remove a thorn in his side. It appears that an unintended consequence of the entire de Ba'athification episode has been to galvanize the electorate. Apathetic voters, who previously told PRT members they did not intend to vote, now feel compelled to go to the polls. Shi'a voters expect that Sunnis will turn out en masse and will vote as a block for the secularist, predominantly-Sunni lists targeted by the AJC. Only overwhelming Shi'a numbers will provide a counter-balance to a perceived Sunni political windfall. End comment.

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